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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of problems confronting crime victims, identifies service approaches to assist crime victims, and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of providing victim advocate services as part of comprehensive crisis intervention centers. Victims not only may bear the suffering of financial loss and emotional trauma as a result of a criminal act, they may feel further victimized by the criminal justice system itself. A variety of models have been established to provide victim advocacy services. In each, some emphasis has been given to immediately available crisis intervention and information and referral services. Probably no other community program is better able to quickly and economically provide both crisis intervention and resources facilitation services than Crisis Centers, especially those with a strong heritage in suicide prevention. Crime Victim Advocacy services demand many of the same characteristics of effective Crisis Intervention Centers: immediate response, around the clock services, committed and dedicated workers, an active intervention philosophy, an effective working relationship with law enforcement agencies, and skills in crisis counseling, bereavement, and death investigations. Although there are some problem areas, such as relationships with law enforcement personnel, territoriality, staff resistance, and victim/offender relationships, Crisis Centers have an opportunity to provide effective crime victim advocacy services. (Author)

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The Crime Victim Advocate Program

A New Service for Crisis Intervention Services

Many community resources are focused on problems created by criminal acts. Activities in our law enforcement agencies, our judicial system, and our rehabilitation programs are all generated by the occurence of criminal offenses, and , for the most part, these institutions focus their primary attention on the persons accused or convicted of the criminal offenses. More often than not, victims of criminal acts go unnoticed by the criminal justice processes, except as the victims are necessary to the perfunctory duties of police investigations and criminal prosecution. Occassionally the public is made aware of a particularly poignant case in which the victim suffers extreme hardships as a result of a crime.

Crime rates continue to increase. In Florida, recent figures indicate that a citizen faces 1 chance in 25 of being the victim of a serious crime each year. Furthermore, some studies indicate that only about 50% of all crimes are even reported. In instances of murder, rape and assault, physical and emotional trauma are evident. In robbery and theft, property and financial loss may create serious budget problems as well as produce intense emotional reactions. In many of these crimes, victims have difficulty dealing with the resulting emotional trauma, and may have difficulty mobilizing sufficient resources to assist them effectively.

Victims not only may bear the suffering of financial loss and emotional trauma as a result of a criminal act, they may feel further victimized by the criminal justice system itself. Knudten, Knudten, and Meade (1976) indicate that many victims experience inconsiderate treatment by officials, unnecessary

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waste of time and financial loss, unwarrented harsh treatment by media representatives and generally inefficient handling of their cases. Simply stated, the problem is that the victims of crimes in our community are often neglected and left in a worse position after the criminal case has been completely adjudicated than before the crime occurred.

There is evidence of growing national and local attention to the problem of crime victims. Most attention has focused on victim compensation. There is currently Federal legislation pending that is designed to compensate victims of violent crime or their survivors. A Victim Compensation Board, under the Department of Justice could allocate up to $50,000.00 for medical expenses, physical and occupational therapy, loss of earnings, support payments for dependents, and even funeral expenses. In Florida, a more modest version of a victim-compensation fund is anticipated to be approved this year. Financial assistance alone does not address the wide range of victim problems. Comprehensive approaches to victim service have also included restitution programs, witness assistance programs, victim education and prevention programs, and general victim assistance.

The purpose of this paper is to present the services possible in a general victim assistance program and to propose that crime victim advocate services are new program areas for crisis intervention services.

Dussich (1974) has suggested a wide range of services which a victim-assistance program could offer. These include:

- immediate assistance at the crime scene
- referring and transporting to available and needed community resources, i.e. medical or social services
- helping with the family during the crisis period

- protecting the victim from exploitation
- follow-up to insure adequate service delivery
- witness assistance and befriending
- crisis counseling
- victim education, and
- facilitating community assistance to victims.

Victim Advocacy Programs, such as suggested by Dussich, have emerged in many different forms. The most common approach has been to place a special victim advocate team within law enforcement agencies. Programs have also been implemented under State Attorneys, County Managers, the Courts, and independent agencies (Baluss, 1975).

In all these program approaches, immediate crisis intervention services for victims and their families, and mobilization of community resources are emphasized. Some may offer financial assistance, others offer witness assistance, while others emphasize research and education, but all have created a means to provide crisis counseling and information and referral services.

Probably no other community program is better able to quickly and economically provide both crisis intervention and resources facilitation services than Crisis Centers, especially those with a strong heritage in suicide prevention. Crime Victim Advocacy services demand many of the same characteristics of effective Crisis Intervention Centers: immediate response, around the clock services, committed and dedicated workers, an active intervention philosophy, an effective working relationship with law enforcement agencies, and skills in crisis counseling, bereavement, and death investigations.

Suicide and crisis intervention programs are ideally suited to develop crime victim advocate services because they already have trained personnel, they are immediately available to respond, and they can provide more economical services than corresponding efforts within other government organizations.

The Alachua County Crisis Center has recently developed a victim advocate program that builds upon the existing core services: immediate telephone intervention backed up by face-to-face outreach capability when necessary. The program also includes a psychological death investigation and bereavement team to respond to suicide, homicide and other traumatic deaths.

In addition to the immediate response to crime victims, the advocate program attempts to:

Coordinate necessary emergency services to eligible victims of crime, such as food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and medical needs.

Provide follow-up assistance, whether counseling, bereavement or information and referral, afterwards to victims of crime.

Expedite and facilitate public assistance programs, criminal justice activities and emergency intervention services.

Develop community education and media presentations to increase the public understanding about the problems and needs of victims of crime.

Encourage the reporting of crimes through attention to the assistance available to victims.

Survey and evaluate the needs of crime victims, and the services available to them.

Document and record data on crime victims.

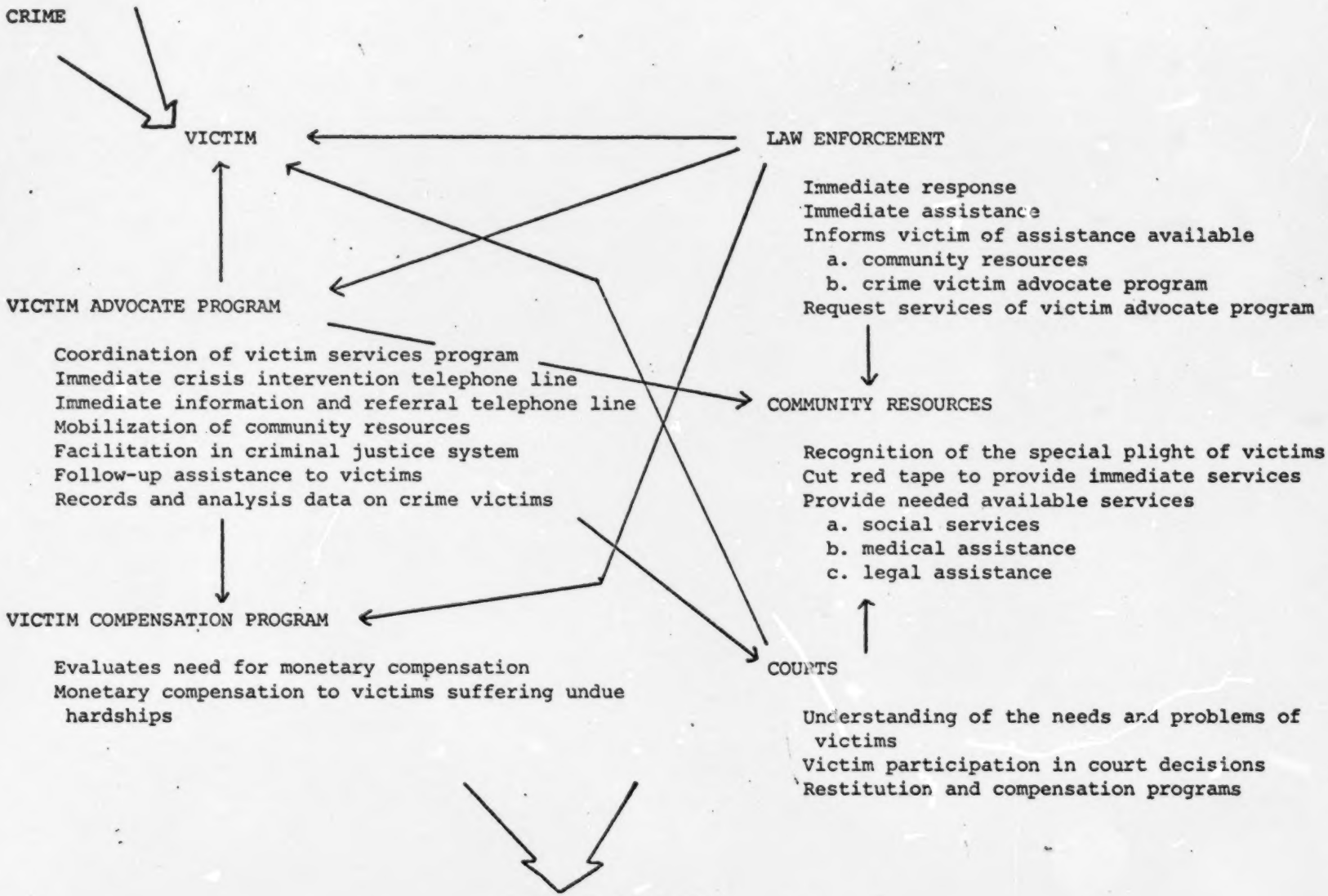
Help cut red tape and delays to victims of crime for available community assistance agencies.

Responding to crime victims has required only a few modifications in our normal operating procedures. When a request is received for victim assistance from law enforcement, community agencies, or victims, the volunteer on duty first attempts to handle the call by telephone. Usually face-to-face contact is requested, so the volunteer may request the assistance of our mobile outreach team, which is on call for other crisis intervention situations as well. The person in charge of this two-person team, the Care Team Consultant, may decide to respond immediately, consult with the Victim Advocate Coordinator, or request the assistance of the Advocate. In general, traumatic crimes, such as murder and rape and brutal assaults require immediate response. Others more often can be followed-up the next day. All responses are managed and followed-up as all crisis contact would be.

The following page presents a summary of the comprehensive victim service program being developed in our community.

ALACHUA COUNTY VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAM

Victim Compensation Program
Crime Victim Advocate Program
Court Restitution Program



Although the initial success has been encouraging, there have been a variety of unexpected problems. Rather than seeing the opportunity to expand their community contributions, some volunteers have resented the intrusion of having to help crime victims. This volunteer resistance may have emerged from inadequate preparation for their participation, or a genuine fear that the Crime Victim Advocate program takes away from our suicide intervention activities. Already, unrealistic expectations are developing for the program. Law enforcement officials have expressed desires for us to respond to all tragic deaths to help with the family, to assist with Spouse and Child abuse crises, to help with family disturbances, and to assist the downtrodden who often come to the attention of law enforcement officers. While their needs are real, the victim advocacy program does not have the resources to assist. Priorities and objectives must be kept clear, or the program will be spread too thin to be effective.

Another problem concerns the Victim/Offender relationship. Many victims simply cannot be reviewed as innocent bystanders. In fact, they may have provoked or participated in the criminal act. In one case, the victim seeking services was alone in the worst section of town, with over $500.00 in cash. He claimed to have been robbed and assaulted. The investigation suggested that he was soliciting homosexuals when he ran into foul play. Spouse Abuse is another example, in which emotional trauma may be real, but the victim's innocence unclear. It would be less complicated if all victims were clearly deserving of our advocacy program.

Territoriality is currently our most difficult problem area. Initially, our only resistance to establishing the victim-advocacy program was from people involved in the rape counseling service, who were concerned that we would hinder their efforts and felt that they were already providing such services for rape victims. As the interest in victim assistance increases, other agencies will see ways to enter the service delivery system. The State Attorney has plans in our community to establish a special rape victim advocacy program with mobile radio units, special vehicles, and all the budgetary resources normally impossible in human-service programs. Competition to participate in crime-victim-advocacy services is bound to increase.

In conclusion, the need for special assistance to certain crime victims seems evident. A variety of models are already established to provide victim advocacy services. In each, crisis intervention and information and referral services are emphasized. Since Crisis Centers are already involved in these two areas, they are an ideal service to participate in providing assistance to crime victims. In spite of certain problem areas, the Alachua County Crisis Center is attempting to test one model for crime victim advocacy services. Initial indications are encouraging.

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